Preface

The present volume assembles several papers from the last ten to fifteen years in slightly corrected and updated form and combined in such a way as to argue a general thesis. Chapters 1–5 substantially reproduce previously published papers (listed before the Bibliography); chapters 6–7 are new, though based on earlier work. To some extent the last five chapters make an attempt to work out the chronology of the early sagas. A number of these have traditionally been dated in the middle or toward the end of the thirteenth century, but I argue that some are appreciably earlier. Part of the project is therefore to establish what the repertory of early sagas is likely to have been. The larger project is an experiment in literary history at the time when the first sagas came into being. Readers will inevitably find the detailed exposition of the texts under study somewhat trying, but it is necessary for the purpose of establishing the textual interplay and the historical framework.

The general argument is that these sagas, without being explicitly ideological, nonetheless interact with one another on political and literary matters. Relations between Iceland and Norway were particularly troubled in the period 1215–1220, and this seems to have been the time frame in which saga writing first blossomed, with the appearance of the most distinguished kings' sagas and the first notable sagas about Saga Age Iceland. It seems inevitable that the political tensions must have carried over into the nascent writing of the period; the Icelanders were surely concerned with the status of their own polity and its connections abroad, most especially its relationship to the mother country.

After some introductory consideration of the antecedent oral traditions, the Icelandic perceptions of self and others become the subject of chapters 3–5. They outline how a prefatory cultivation of royal panegyric yielded

to a more searching and critical account of the Norwegian kings. In due course this critical posture affected the composition of native sagas, in which international antipathies are replaced by regional rivalries within Iceland. Chapter 6 explores a few relevant cases in the area of Eyjafjörður. But the literature was not long constrained by local antagonisms, and chapter 7 illustrates how saga writing soon freed itself from political concerns and embraced more personal and social issues. Taken together, the chapters try to illuminate how the earliest sagas evolved into the narratives that modern readers still find so remarkable.

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